

TECHNOLOGY



finds its place in Silicon Valley schools

Three very different districts in Silicon Valley explain the strategies they use to enhance learning through technology.

Technology today is poised to usher in the best of times. Exploring what other districts do highlights the common themes as well as the unique challenges.

Let's learn from three districts in Silicon Valley – three very distinct districts – small, large and in between. Basic aid and revenue limit. Charter and not. Each setting sheds light on the larger issues and offers strategies to consider.

Snapshot: Portola Valley School District

Carol Piraino, superintendent

Kim Brown, director of technology

■ PVSD by the numbers:

706 students, K-8

2 sites plus district office

1 percent free/reduced lunch

Basic aid district

50 certificated staff, 25 classified staff

1.75 technology staff

800 desktops, laptops, netbooks, iPads

Funding: General fund, eRate, parcel tax, education foundation

Overall philosophy and vision

For PVSD, technology is integrated with instruction and is not a stand-alone or add-on. "It's not about acquisition," says Technology Director Kim Brown. "We ask ourselves, 'Can this technology help the students achieve a level of creativity and critical thinking and help them articulate knowledge in multiple ways?'"

Brown is often included in the district's curriculum initiatives, not to advance technology tools, but as an essential participant in discussions about learning. "For us, it's about the learning. Twenty-first century skills are not about technology tools. They're about thinking, collaborating, problem solving. Tech may help you get there faster, but tech is not the point."

Organization

Brown has a small staff of 1.75 FTEs. One handles the advanced trouble-shooting,

By Paula Hundley and Marie Scigliano

servers, and basic district network issues. The other works on lower-level troubleshooting and spends more time in classrooms assisting students and teachers. Brown works across all aspects of the technology department, from servers to teacher support.

The district contracts out high-level network infrastructure work. Year one with the IT firm was expensive, as the district rebuilt its infrastructure and “cleaned up” legacy issues. Now that the infrastructure is stable, the cost of consulting is far less than that of an employee. “This has been hugely cost effective for us,” says Brown.

Standardization vs. site-based

A certain level of standardization is essential to a small district with limited support staff, maintains Brown, “but that being said, you have to be flexible.” It’s one thing to have standardized printers and projectors, but when it comes to instructional tools, sites take the lead. Different grade levels, age groups and needs lead to different decisions, all supported by the tech team.

“We have teachers who just want to go for it,” says Brown. “Those innovators are really valuable. They lead forward and often become the standard.” PVSD encourages innovation and expects teachers to share what they do. Consultation with Brown and her team is the key – no Lone Rangers, they’re all in this together.

Building teacher capacity

Professional development and teacher support in PVSD is about as personalized as it can get. Because the district is so small, because the tech staff stretches across only two sites, and because that same tech team is in and out of classrooms, they basically build teacher capacity by going door-to-door. “Have you thought about this? Oh, you’re interested in that – let’s take a look.” Customized, in the moment, and based on need – not directive.

Other pieces to the puzzle? Two teachers on special assignment, one per site, to assist teachers – each a full-time teacher who tackles this additional role. Faculty meeting share-outs and short talks. And one last key to integration: IT and Ed Tech are joined

under the same umbrella, not separate. Integrated at the top, integrated throughout.

Successes and challenges

Brown points to PVSD’s move to the cloud as one key success over the last three years. Providing a consistent, collaborative platform – Google apps – has created a seamless transition between home and school for students and teachers. And it has increased efficiency and collaboration in all areas. They have also seen better integration



of all technology tools, from computers to iOS devices. Another big push has been better communication with parents via websites, blogs and academic calendars.

Certainly, challenges lie ahead. Money is always a challenge, even in this small, affluent district. The district would also like to see more full-scale adoption of new technologies by the teaching staff. They plan to continue their individualized approach and support and leverage key players in their work.

Trends and next steps

Several trends are already impacting this district. Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) begins in the middle school this year. Brown believes this trend will grow substantially in the years to come. She’s not sure BYOD will save much money, especially with the backbone upgrades and separate guest network to support it, but she sees BYOD as part of the growth of mobile technologies in schools.

Key work over the next few years? PVSD is moving forward with work on data visualizations. They want staff to see visually – and

regularly – how their students are performing. They also have teachers experimenting with the flipped classroom concept and believe they are headed down the path of a 1:1 implementation.

From instructional strategies to data to devices, PVSD focuses on what’s needed to support students and teachers. “It’s always about the learning,” says Brown.

Snapshot: Campbell Union School District

Eric Andrew, superintendent

Randy Phelps, director of technology

■ CUSD by the numbers

7,500 students, K-8
13 sites plus district offices
Revenue limit district
38 percent free/reduced lunch
410 certificated staff, 330 classified staff
4.5 technology staff
2,600 desktops, laptops, netbooks, iPads, iPod Touches, Smartphones, Mac/PC
Funding: General fund, bond, small grants, Title money, eRate

Overall philosophy and vision

CUSD is unique in that each of its schools is a charter that relies heavily on local vision. “Historically, our role was to support goals set by each site,” says Technology Director Randy Phelps. “But our level of collaboration has changed pretty dramatically, and now we want to use technology to drive our goals. We want to use technology to accelerate and revolutionize what we do in the classroom.”

Phelps wants his department to provide service, leadership, vision, focus and consistency. His team looks for comprehensive solutions that help people do their work.

“We have a motto that we must ‘bring the sunshine.’ We know the pressure teachers are under, and they’re often stressed when we get to them. Instead of being procedural, we listen, and we listen for the problem behind the problem. We provide a big smile and encouragement, and then we provide a solution that addresses the immediate issue and also resolves the underlying cause.”

Organization

Phelps organizes his staff according to their strengths. One maintains the networks

and servers while another builds applications and databases. One focuses on desktop support and peripherals, while another delivers teaching and learning tools for all sites. Phelps fills in everywhere. Additionally, all staff members – including Phelps – take one day a week to work together to eliminate trouble tickets. These “Ticket Tuesdays” keep issues from becoming long-term issues and “keep our feet on the ground,” says Phelps.

Phelps has a simple approach to what’s done in house or contracted out. “If something is a task we only do once or twice a year, or if it’s a hardware repair that requires a .5 sized tool, we recognize those activities are better suited for folks who do them every day, and we farm those out. It saves us money and gives us back time to work toward our vision.”

Standardization vs. site-based

Phelps and his team work intensively with sites. Their goal is to aid, assist, guide and lead. “Our goal is to say ‘yes’ once we understand what folks are trying to accomplish and once they can articulate it to us,” explains Phelps. Conversation is the key. When sites have an interest, the tech team asks to be brought in. Says Phelps, “It’s critical to be involved in the conversation early, to ask good questions, and to be willing to help with the homework.”

Building teacher capacity

CUSD runs a summer seminar series, the weeklong iTeach each August. The two-year-old program has reached 60 of the district’s 400 teachers. It focuses on developing teacher leaders who model the need for modern practices in the learning environment. Technology is an underlying key element, but iTeach includes changes in classroom design, data-driven instruction, and personalized learning.

During the school year, Phelps intends to grow online training and provide follow-up support for the teacher leaders and highlight their work to others. He also points to the Ticket Tuesdays as a way that his staff supports teachers. The tech team spots those pockets of excellence to leverage and also make suggestions to teachers they work

with. “Would you be willing to try...?” becomes a common conversation.

Successes and challenges

Key successes for CUSD over the past three years include a teacher laptop initiative, increased test scores, and a much more coordinated vision and processes across all departments.

A key challenge? Phelps says the district has had a history of “app hopping” – like many districts, looking for panaceas. “We need to buckle down and apply ourselves and have formal and consistent processes



for helping teachers and staff learn software and follow guidelines to determine if the tool will work.” To do that, they are thinning down the number of solutions and making the training process simpler, easier, and delivered in a variety of ways.

Trends and next steps

Phelps foresees that the focus on individual learning is here to stay. Tailoring instruction to meet individual needs will increase, especially with technology tools that support such personalized learning.

He believes that blogs and wikis can make huge contributions to education, from the social aspect to a K-12 portfolio. “Just look at Yelp, YouTube, Facebook,” says Phelps. “People have an almost pathological need to share. We can harness that in our classrooms. No one has to teach a kid how to do Facebook. Blogs and wikis are cheap and easy, with no training needed, and available from all devices.”

Upcoming work? Implementation of a

new fiber network, a new phone system, and 12 pilots using iPads. Plus learning walls in all classrooms and another phase of refresh – all with the bond measure in CUSD.

Phelps and staff...bringing the sunshine.

Snapshot: San Jose Unified School District

Vince Matthews, superintendent

Derek Moore, director of technology

■ SJUSD by the numbers

32,000 students, K-12
40 sites plus district offices
Revenue limit district
47% free/reduced lunch
1,700 certificated staff
2,300 classified staff
21 technology staff, plus .25-1.0 FTE per site for tech support
15,000 desktops, laptops, iPads, Mac (only 200 machines are PCs)
Funding sources: General fund, bond, eRate, MS Voucher

Philosophy and goals

SJUSD’s new strategic plan calls for closing the opportunity gap and providing all students a 21st century education and skills. Director of Technology Derek Moore says “bring it on.” In his second year with the district, Moore says one thing that impressed him from the beginning was that the conversation about 21st century learning was a curricular and district discussion at the highest levels, not just relegated to the technology department.

“My job is to bring all aspects of our work into alignment and support of those two critical goals,” says Moore. He created a visual aid that shows all the parts, linked together in a tiered pyramid, moving from the base (operations) to the top (instructional technology). “These foundation levels have to just plain work,” he says. “People have to know they can count on it and plan their instruction around it.”

Organization

SJUSD has a different, bigger organization for technology services. A team of 21 staff is centralized at the district offices, plus each site has from a .25-1.0 FTE for tech support. Though the goal has been that site people work more on teacher support, in reality

to keep things working they have focused on the “fix it” aspects.

Moore’s department handles everything internally except machine repair. SJUSD has a long Apple tradition and all the machines have warranties, so repair issues are contracted out. All other services – from network to data warehouse to business systems – are handled internally.

Standardization vs. site-based

Even though SJUSD dwarfs the other two districts, Moore promotes site autonomy. “The needs are just different. We’re a large, diverse district. What needs to happen at one site is different than another.” That being said, the bulk of SJUSD’s foundation is certainly standardized.

Autonomy plays a significant role at the top of Moore’s building blocks design: instructional technology. Sites make their own decisions about those needs – and largely pay for them – based on the district’s strategic plan.

Building teacher capacity

Historically, SJUSD had an instructional technology department that developed and led workshops, worked with teachers at sites, and led the charge on technology tools. Budget cuts, coupled with retirements, closed that department, and Moore does not intend to bring it back. From his viewpoint, it’s time to fully integrate services.

The district has curriculum coaches who work with sites, and Moore envisions this as the best mechanism for modeling the integrated use of technology. Technology should always be part of the conversation and the solution, he says, without driving either.

Successes and challenges

SJUSD can point to a number of recent key successes: A \$14 million network upgrade project and data center, district-wide wireless, and a new phone system projected to save \$300,000 annually. Plus, throughout the life of their 10-year bond they have been able to refresh computers every year, except for the last two.

Which brings Moore to one of his biggest challenges: Refresh. “We need to get back to refreshing computers at a rate that keeps

them viable, and we really need to dispose of obsolete machines. ... People have a hard time letting go,” he says.

In a large district, with many departments and building blocks that tie into technology, Moore says they need to “bridge the gaps, really tie things together, to make the user experience a truly positive one – things need to work as expected every time and the curricular ties need to be there.”

Trends and next steps

Like others, Moore sees BYOD on the horizon for his district, and he’s all for it. “Absolutely, bring your device and put it on my network!” he says. He also believes that the adoption of eBooks will accelerate the use of mobile technologies, especially iPads.

For now, Moore and his department work to build a strong foundation and support. **Continued on page 38**



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Teacher Group, have dedicated links on the website that include agendas and minutes. As part of a federal review, a survey regarding the parent-student-teacher Title 1 compact provides input on the document.

Students serving on school and civic committees post updates on the website monthly. Weekly surveys and annual Title 1 surveys are featured on the website. Staff members schedule monthly open computer time for parents to complete surveys and provide feedback.

Decision-making opportunities and results are shared on the website. These items



provide valuable feedback to teachers, administration and staff on parents' perspectives on the school. The information is two-way between the school and families to build strong partnerships.

6. Collaborating with the community:

Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Our families come primarily from Palm Springs, but we also serve a large number of students who transfer from surrounding communities. Community service opportunities, including not only the immediate

community but also the broader area influenced by our school community, are posted on the website to provide all students the opportunity to give back to the school and local community. The community service coordinator maintains sign-up sheets to inform other organizations of community service volunteers scheduled for specific events.

As a public website, all community members are encouraged to interact with the school electronically through a "contact us" link.

Engaging parent participation

Our school website enhances traditional types of parent communication and engagement. Through the website, the school communicates with and supports parents. The website provides tools for all parents to support the achievement of their children. Lastly, parents communicate with the school regularly through the website links, creating a partnership between our families and the school.

For up-to-the-minute parent participation and engagement, a dynamic school website is, indeed, the bomb. ■

References

Epstein, Joyce L. (2001). *School, family, and community Partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Tracy Piper is principal of Raymond Cree Middle School in Palm Springs.

Technology finds its place

Continued from page 19

support critical services, with the goal of spending increased amounts of their time on the ultimate goal – technology-enhanced instruction and student learning.

A time of optimism

For these three districts in Silicon Valley, it's a good time. A time of expanding options and optimism, a time of seeing technology impact learning in natural, welcome ways. Each district faces its challenges. Some

themes are similar, others unique to the setting. Yet with each, there is an energy, a passion, and a belief that the more the conversation is about learning, the more technology finally has found its place. ■

Editor's note: Randy Phelps is now with the Eastside Union School District.

Paula Hundley is founder and consultant, K12 DigitalWorks. Marie Scigliano is founder and consultant, School Savvy.

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